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### Review Of "Assuming A Body: Transgender And Rhetorics Of Materiality" By G. Salamon

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Gayle Salamon  
*Assuming a Body: Transgender and  
Rhetorics of Materiality*

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Columbia University Press, 2010, 215 pp.  
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TAMSIN LORRAINE

ALTHOUGH FEMINIST CONTINENTAL philosophy has explored the question of the body from different perspectives, it could be argued that it has yet to do justice to the materiality of the body (despite many attempts) or to give an account of sexual difference that does not marginalize the experiences of intersex and transgender people. Gayle Salamon's book *Assuming a Body* addresses not only these issues, but also the often contentious divide between feminist and transgender communities. Through a series of readings drawn from both sides of the feminist-transgender divide, Salamon attempts to "enrich and broaden the mostly gender normative accounts of bodily materiality offered by psychoanalysis and phenomenology" as well as to "understand transgendered bodies as embodying a specificity that is finally not reducible to the material" (8). Over the course of seven chapters, she lays out an account of embodiment drawn from psychoanalytic, phenomenological, transgender, and sexual difference theory that takes its materiality seriously without minimizing its ongoing implication in an open-ended and temporal process. In doing so, she tracks a notion of the "felt sense" of the body that she insists emerges from the unfolding meaning of an embodied subject who is inevitably entangled with the social and cultural production of normative gender and sex even when the

latter comes into tension with that subject's felt sense of gendered and sexed embodiment.

Salamon contends that the lived experience of one's embodiment has a history of its own. Just as feminist theory should engage the reality of transgender lives more fully, transgender theory should avoid describing transgender identity as rooted in a "pure" experience of material reality; overlooking the history of how the "felt sense" of embodiment arises can shut down the productive reworkings of materiality that could ameliorate the lives of transpeople and open us all to a broader range of lived experience. Exploring the connections between feminist continental theory and trans-theory—the kind of exploration that Salamon engages in this book—could lead not only to such reworkings, but to an understanding of sexed and gendered identity that doesn't reduce the transgendered subject to the "constitutive outside of binary gender" (98).

Although sympathetic to attempts, such as Jay Prosser's in *Second Skins*, to counter the marginalization of transsexuality, especially in feminist and queer theory, by foregrounding the materiality of transgender lives and insisting that "the transsexual body is 'unimpeachably real,'" Salamon argues in chapter 1 that this kind of approach puts the transsexual body in a "domain of plenitude and fullness" that ultimately renders it beyond the realm of resignification. She contends that psychoanalytic approaches to the body, such as those of Jacques Lacan, Kaja Silverman, Didier Anzieu, Paul Schilder, and Judith Butler, as well as Sigmund Freud, have more promise for feminist and transgender theorists than attempts to ground identity by appeal to an ostensibly nondiscursive bodily materiality. The psychoanalytic theories she explores could be extended to overcome their binary bias in order to enable an affirmation of one's materiality through a reconfiguration and resignification of the lived meanings of those materialities: "To affirm a materiality—or, to be less abstract, to insist on the livability of one's own embodiment, particularly when that embodiment is culturally abject or socially despised—is to undertake a constant and always incomplete labor to reconfigure more than just the materiality of our own bodies. It is to strive to create and transform the lived meanings of those materialities" (42).

In chapter 2, Salamon presents a reading of Merleau-Ponty's notion of sexuality as the exemplar of transcendence; sexuality is a desiring relation to the other or the world in which my body becomes "the vehicle through which I am compelled into relation with the world, where it is finally only that relation that gives me a body" (56). This reaching out to the world entails a phantasmatic register that Merleau-Ponty reconfigures, "transforming it from a register characterized by a lack of materiality into a register characterized by an ungraspability" (61). That is, I take it, sexuality as the embodied reaching toward what transcends me opens me toward the kind of possibilities in resignification of the material that Salamon argued in her previous chapter

psychoanalytic theory could suggest; the phenomenological acknowledgment of temporality brings out the open-ended meaning of sexed, gendered, and desiring bodies that are always in relation in ways that exceed the binary categories of contemporary culture. Whereas for psychoanalysis “the body is available to a subject only through a complex set of mental representations, of psychic images, designated alternately as the bodily ego or the body schema” (4), Merleau-Ponty moves the capacities of the unconscious “from the domain of the mind to the domain of the body” (47). Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s account brings out a materialist way of understanding the unconscious that acknowledges the role cultural meaning plays in our interpretations of the body without undermining the body’s materiality and our felt sense of that materiality; what exceeds the binary categories through which I live my gendered and sexed identity is my body as a process of relational desire that is always transcending those meanings.

In chapter 3, Salamon addresses various misconceptions of “social construction” theory and argues that at its best, social construction offers a way to understand how the felt sense of embodiment arises, “in all its historical and cultural variations, with all its urgency and immediacy” and asks “what it is, finally, that is delivered by that felt sense” (77). Salamon contends, in line with her critique of giving primacy to a nondiscursive bodily materiality presented in chapter 1, that the body severed from any psychic investments “has no meaning at all” (88). The “real” body, if taken in a phenomenological sense, can move us beyond a notion of the body as a “nonsocial material thing” (92) where what is real about it “confirms what we already know (about materiality, about gender, about itself)” and instead point us toward the capacity of the body “to exceed what we suppose about it. To be real, in this sense, is to hold one’s body and one’s self open to the possibilities of what one *cannot* know or anticipate in advance. It is to be situated at materiality’s threshold of possibility rather than caught within a materiality that is at its core constricted, constrictive, and determining” (92). Salamon thus builds upon the understanding of embodiment as a relation between the material and the phantasmatic developed through her readings of psychoanalytic and phenomenological theory in order to suggest that at the same time that our experience of embodiment is conditioned by social and cultural meaning, its materiality also always exceeds those meanings. Thus, although there is no nondiscursive materiality to which to appeal in order to counter normative conceptions of the body, we would do well to take the felt sense of embodiment of others seriously, perhaps especially when it challenges our own understanding of gender and sex: “Though it cannot fail to have meaning, the body’s morphology does not in any of these instances script either identification or desire, and those who understand bodily morphology to be constitutive of a truth that exceeds ideologies of gender would do well to take seriously some of the ways in which gender is currently being lived” (93).

In chapter 4, Salamon considers the tense relations between women's studies and trans studies and between queer theory and trans studies, and discusses the violence of some of the reactions to transgender initiatives. She expresses sympathy for "[Susan] Stryker's observation that all gender trouble has now become consolidated under the sign of trans and that members of the gay and lesbian community, through that containment, are able to represent themselves to the public as ever more similar to heterosexuals, and thus safer" (106), and considers some of the dilemmas presented by confusing sexual orientation with gender identity. In order to perceive the ways in which sexual orientation and gender identity are mutually implicated, we need to consider how subjects possess not only a gender that "springs whole from an internally felt sense of self," but also hope to receive recognition from others in terms of "the properly gendered name that the normative gender configurations of the social world conspire to withhold" (125). My gender identity "has a social life that exceeds my own" (123), in the sense that I need to negotiate processes of naming and categorization that may challenge or contradict my felt sense of embodiment. The violent reaction of even feminist and gay and lesbian communities to trans troubling of gender identity may speak to anxieties about how to engage in such negotiations.

In chapters 5 and 6, Salamon investigates Luce Irigaray's and Elizabeth Grosz's accounts of sexual difference in order to argue that if we go beyond the irreducible difference posited by both, in which "transsexuality becomes the constitutive outside of sexual difference" (168), we could move toward a notion of sexual difference inclusive of transgender experience that "need not be located at the level of sex at all" (168). The kind of negotiation of difference manifest in the trans body allows us to go beyond an understanding of the traversal of sexual boundaries that would posit it as an unrepresentable breach. Salamon's final chapter corroborates this challenge to an irreducibly binary understanding of sexual difference by undermining sex as the anchor for sexual difference. Her characterization of the multiple ways that documents of the state come into play in the transition from one sex to another suggests that "sex is assigned rather than discovered, interpreted even as it is documented," and thus challenges the notion that "gender may travel, but sex is firm ground" (190). If sex is more a matter of a series of officially sanctioned documents attesting to one's sex than a fixed category, then even sex cannot ground gender identity (or transitions from one side of sexual difference to the other). "If we are to give difference its due as a vital force, as Irigaray invites us to, we must also acknowledge that femininity is compossible with the category of male, that the masculinity expressed within some iterations of femaleness is as ontologically robust as any other kind of masculinity" (144).

Salamon's attempt to bridge the contentious gap between feminist continental philosophy and trans studies is both welcome and provocative.

Her readings set up juxtapositions that invite further exploration and I found her argument that we need to overcome resistances on both sides in order to foster productive collaboration entirely persuasive. While I recommend her book to anyone interested in questions about subjectivity pertinent to our contemporary situation, it is not a book I would recommend for a theoretically unsophisticated audience (for example, undergraduates). Some of her readings of specific theoretical texts are quite difficult and seem somewhat disjointed from the attempt to render them accessible to the life problems posed by being transgender. In addition, the book as a whole has a fragmented quality that may speak to the difficulty of the topic as well as the previous existence of some of the chapters as stand-alone articles. I would have liked to have seen more integration of the chapters and a clearer account drawn out of her readings of how we might give difference its due at the same time that we recognize the need to negotiate the normative gender categories of social life as well as honor a felt sense of embodiment that may be in tension with those categories. As a preliminary exploration of some possible directions, however, this collection of essays, if not quite jelled into a definitive statement, is an important resource and instigation for future work along some very promising lines of thought.

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